

# Listening and Responding to Jesus' Call?

## Ordination & Installation of Ruling Elders

Matthew 4:12-23. Isaiah 43:1-3a  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 29, 2023

At one level or another we've all heard it. If not, you and I wouldn't be here today. What we've heard, and then responded to, is Jesus' call, "Follow me." Now granted, those of us who've attended church since we were small children probably heard that voice coming from our parents or guardians, without much of an option to attend church or not. But that's not what this is about. Perhaps it was through Confirmation Class as a youth, or even a decision made later in life to return to, or attend a community of faith for the first time, **there was the internal hearing of that voice, "Follow me."**

In the Gospel of Matthew, these words were Jesus' call to those who would choose to follow him and become one of his disciples. And remember, all these folks, including Jesus, were Jewish. **This decision was not about becoming a Christian. Christianity didn't even exist yet. Rather, this was joining a movement led by Jesus of Nazareth.**

**What does it mean, then, to identify oneself a Christian?** That, of course, depends upon who you ask. There are more and more folks today, particularly on the progressive end of the theological spectrum, who choose to identify themselves simply as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. The late Rev. Dr. Harold Hill, who taught religious studies at the University of Tulsa next door, and was an active participant here at College Hill, where his daughter Marilyn still attends, once identified himself as a Jesusite, one who follows Jesus as one's teacher, rather than identifying himself with the broader term Christian. This way of expressing discipleship distanced him from what our culture, especially here in the Bible belt, has been inundated with from **those who declare that Christianity means subscribing exclusively to specific orthodox and/or evangelical theological beliefs.** These beliefs are often used as a litmus test to determine who's in and who's out. **For many, those beliefs seem to have taken precedence over actually following what Jesus modeled and taught.** Remember, Jesus simply said, "Follow me," not: Believe what traditionalist theologians say *about* me in order to consider yourself a true follower and Christian.

Perhaps another misunderstanding involves what it means to be called into ministry. Answering Jesus' call to follow does not necessarily mean being asked to attend seminary and become a pastor of a congregation, or a chaplain in a hospital, or a missionary to some country far away. **Here at College Hill, we use the word 'ministry' in its broadest sense. For we hold to the belief that God, by virtue of our baptism, places a call upon the hearts, minds, and spirits of everyone.** That's why our worship bulletin each Sunday lists, **"Ministers: All the members of the congregation."**

So, perhaps a more appropriate question to ask is **how have you responded to the call to active and faithful discipleship?** And discipleship simply means how each of us chooses to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus throughout our daily lives,

personally and professionally. In a nutshell, how are we loving God, loving our neighbors, loving ourselves, even our enemies?

Now it is true, as Presbyterians, we believe the Spirit of God speaks through the work of a Nominating Committee, as well as to an individual, and then to the entire congregation when it comes to discerning who should be ordained and installed as Ruling Elders to actively serve on what we call the Session, our board or council of church leaders. And later in this service, we have the privilege of ordaining and installing our next class of Ruling Elders who responded in the affirmative to the call to serve.

Now, let's explore a bit deeper an understanding of answering Jesus' call, "Follow me". Matthew reports that as Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, one who is named Simon (who will later be renamed, Peter) and Andrew. Both were working together to cast a net into the sea. I get a big kick out of Matthew adding, "for they were fishermen," as if his readers needed an explanation of why two grown men are casting a net into the sea. With an economy of words, Matthew writes that **Jesus simply says to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." In other words, invite others to follow Jesus, to join the movement and ministry efforts.**

Without any explanation of why, we're told they "immediately left their nets and followed" Jesus. The same thing happens when Jesus comes across two other brothers, James and John. They were mending their nets in a boat with their father, Zebedee. This was obviously the family business and their livelihood. On a literal level, the act of immediately leaving their profession seems oddly impractical, perhaps irresponsible, and not all that realistic. But the gospel writer is simply following a common literary pattern known as a "call story," dozens of which occur throughout the Old and New Testaments.

**A primary characteristic of most biblical call stories is to explain the abruptness and total commitment demonstrated by those being called by God.** In the case of Simon and Andrew, they gave up their profession and very livelihood in order to follow Jesus. This is still common among 2<sup>nd</sup>-career pastors. James and John gave up more than that, for they also violated the patriarchal system of their day by not asking for the permission of their father, but simply left him sitting in the boat. That's not cool by any societal standards. So, rather than attaching too literal of an interpretation to these call stories, their primary purpose was to indicate that **answering God's call to discipleship always comes with a cost.**

We are being informed that **perhaps there are some things we must be willing to give up in order to follow Jesus as our guide and teacher.** That shouldn't really surprise us, however, because **there is no ministry effort that doesn't bear a cost, whether it be in the form of the sharing of our time, our talents, and yes, even our financial resources.** And sometimes it involves moving out beyond our own protective comfort zone. We experience this, for example, every time we put being inclusive into practice. A major point of the story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples, then, is to indicate the *response* of those being called by God.

The four fishermen, without much of a specific explanation of what Jesus was actually calling them to do, responded by dropping everything and immediately following Jesus by joining him in his ministry. Here, therefore, is what we are faced with. Since you and I are also called by God in one fashion or another to discipleship and a particular ministry effort, which we believe we are by virtue of our baptism, it makes

sense that we should also pay careful attention to how we respond. Even if we begin by giving some kind of justification of why God must have gotten the wrong person, or congregation, do we usually end up responding by following the call, or not? Without any guilt trip intended, **is there perhaps a calling to which you have yet to respond, or feel you are being called to now?** Perhaps it's to volunteer to serve on one of our ministry teams.

Now, concerning the actual call to discipleship itself, **how do we "hear," discern, or experience that call in the first place?** Like most spiritual matters, **that depends upon your understanding of the nature and character of God, hence your own spiritual practices.** Therefore, trying to precisely describe just *how* God puts a call on our hearts and minds varies from person to person. I've always contended that **God speaks to each and every person's heart, mind, and spirit in the way and manner in which that person can hear and understand.** So again, that will depend upon your own theological understanding of God. Or, if you prefer, the Divine Sacred Presence dwelling beyond, among, and within you. That also means that how you hear and discern God's call may even change throughout your own journey of faith. It certainly has in mine as my own theological perspective has become broader and more progressive.

**There are a few things, however, that might help us to hear, to discern God's call to follow.** As far as the ministry efforts in your personal life and within the life of this community of faith is concerned, I would suggest that God is calling you (and us) to:

- the particular service that *excites* you the most;
- those areas that are a *good match* with your God-given gifts and talents;
- the type of ministry you feel most *passionate* about;
- the projects or organizations that *energize* you, not drain you.

This process is what each of the Ruling Elders use to help discern what ministry team to serve on during the coming year. I would suggest the same exercise to each of you, to see where you might best offer your time and talents to the ministry efforts of our community of faith, or to wherever.

Remember the simplicity and clarity of Jesus' call, recognizing the words, "Follow me," more as an invitation than a command. For we do indeed have a choice. So as always, **how you and I respond to that call to follow Jesus is up to each one of us, individually and as a congregation.** And that call doesn't necessarily come just once, but often throughout our journey of life and faith.

**Perhaps the Sacred Presence of the Divine is calling out to you this very day.**

Amen.